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SUBJECT: ODESA: CITY WITH A RUSSIAN PAST SEARCHING FOR A  
UKRAINIAN IDENTITY

Classified By: Political Counselor Colin Cleary for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

#### Summary

1. (C) Odesa, with a population of over a million, is an important commercial and cultural center for Ukraine. The city, known for its sea port and ethnically diverse population, is still strongly influenced by historic and cultural ties to Russia. In recent meetings, interlocutors described a tolerant city whose inhabitants continue to distrust NATO, but who - for the most part - do not object to hosting the annual Partnership for Peace-related Sea Breeze military exercises. Our contacts expect the Party of Regions (POR), which received over 50 percent of the vote oblast-wide in the 2007 parliamentary elections, to come out on top in expected presidential elections this year. Some foresee newcomer Arseniy Yatsenyuk placing second behind POR's Yanukovych. Our contacts felt the national government should do a better job of articulating its policies towards NATO and establishing a greater sense of national unity among the regions. However, no one believed that there is a significant movement in Odesa in favor of political union with Russia. End Summary.

#### Neutral on Sea Breeze, Against NATO

2. (C) Anatoliy Boyko of the NGO Committee of Voters of Ukraine (CVU), explained that most people in Odesa are neutral about the Sea Breeze exercise itself but many still have negative views towards NATO. Oleg Dolzhenkov, of Odesa City Council, told us that he expects more protesters - mostly coming from Crimea - to demonstrate against the exercise in Odesa this year. He attributed this to election-year posturing by anti-NATO groups and Natalia Vitrenko's Progressive Socialist Party, which favors integration into the Russian Federation. He explained that the city government supported the exercise and faced no serious opposition to it within the city. However, he explained that the city had to take a cautious approach with the public on the subject of NATO to avoid a backlash against the exercise.

3. (C) Odesa Mayor Eduard Hurvitz, a former Our Ukraine Rada Deputy and elected mayor in 2006 on a pro-Yushchenko platform, told us that the national government needed to do a better job of implementing its policy towards NATO. Hurvitz criticized Ukrainian leaders' efforts thus far to explain the benefits of Ukraine's potential membership in the Alliance to the public, and lamented widespread misconceptions about the Alliance promoted in Odesa by Russian media. Hurvitz underlined that Russian media consistently send negative messages about NATO to Ukrainian viewers.

#### Nostalgia for Russia but no Lean towards Moscow

4. (C) Dolzhenkov said that while most in Odesa speak

Russian and identify with Russian culture, there is no serious interest in closer political ties to Moscow. He explained that Odesa's multicultural make-up contributed to a strong sense of civic identity and a streak of independence. Dolzhenkov said that the national government has done a bad job of unifying the country's different regions. He felt that the Government's overemphasis on use of the Ukrainian language in Russian speaking Odesa had backfired, especially when explaining its NATO policy.

15. (C) When describing Odesa's sense of Ukrainian identity, CVU head Boyko described differences between the oblast's urban and rural populations, as well as its diverse ethnic groups. He said the city is deeply influenced by its Soviet past and nostalgia for the Russian Empire. In the rural northern parts of the oblast, there is a majority of ethnic Russians - who typically support POR - intermixed with some ethnic Ukrainians. The southern part of the oblast has significant ethnic Bulgarian, Moldovan, and Romanian populations. Boyko asserted that the complex ethnic patchwork and rural/urban differences made simple characterization impossible. Despite a general affinity to Russian culture, he saw no signs of significant support for closer political ties to Russia.

16. (C) Odesa Mayor Hurvitz explained that Ukraine's regional differences have made it hard for the government to create a stronger sense of national identity. He asserted, however, that Ukraine as a whole had become more democratic in the past five years and that it was leaning more toward Europe than Moscow. Hurvitz believes that Ukraine's most difficult bilateral issue with Russia is the status of the Russian

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Black Sea Fleet based in Crimea. He asserted that it was in Ukraine's best interest that the fleet leave in 2017 when its lease terminates. However he said that the GOU had thus far done a bad job of handling the issue with Russia and that it had to smooth bilateral relations.

#### Party of Regions Stronghold but Hoping for Change

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17. (C) Dolzhenkov said there was general disappointment in President Yushchenko. He expected Party of Regions candidate Yanukovych to win in Odesa in upcoming presidential elections but noted a growing interest in candidate Yatsenyuk. He felt that Yatsenyuk's appeal to voters as a fresh face could help to him to place second. He added that Odesa voters do not seem to hold Yatsenyuk's signing of the "infamous" 2008 letter requesting a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine against him.

18. (C) Boyko confirmed that POR is the leading party in the oblast, and that Yushchenko's Our Ukraine is fractured and unlikely to get many votes. He assessed that the Lytvyn Bloc is in a good position while Yuliya Tymoshenko's Bloc would do fairly well despite weak local party leadership. Yatsenyuk has not been active in the oblast but is an attractive candidate to voters hoping for change despite lacking the local organization to run a effective campaign and the time to put together a strong team in time for the elections. Boyko expects serious problems with the election process such as vote buying, misuse of administrative resources, faulty voter lists, and poorly trained election officials. However, he noted that the situation will differ from the first round of the 2004 elections -- this time no single party will have a monopoly on the power or the resources to decisively influence the outcome.

#### Locals Say No Organized Hate Groups

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19. (C) Most of our interlocutors described a city tolerant towards its many ethnic groups. Boyko described Oleh Tyahnybok, leader of the nationalist Svoboda party, as a

"creation of the media," dismissing him as a serious presidential candidate. The local Rodina Party, which is anti-NATO and for official use of the Russian language, has limited support. Boyko was not aware of organized hate groups in the city despite a recent clash which resulted in the death of a member of reported nationalist group. Despite several anti-Semitic incidents of graffiti and vandalism in 2007, Dolzhenkov said that anti-Semitic incidents had been carried out by individuals and not by organized hate groups. Rabbi Avraham Wolff, a leading rabbi in the region, told us that anti-Semitism continued to be a problem but the recent examples he cited were in other regions of Ukraine.

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